Suggestions for Creating a High-Performing Team

The following suggestions can help make the difference between a frustrating, ineffective team experience and a fulfilling, effective team experience.

1. Work to Develop Positive Norms. During your first few meetings, you will be developing norms for how your group will operate, e.g., norms for learning, performance, sharing ideas, dealing with conflict, attending meetings, respect for one another, etc. Once established, team norms can be difficult to change so it is critical that you work to develop positive norms from your first meeting and challenge any negative norms that seem to be emerging.

2. Discuss Your Goals for the Team. Many teams do not have an initial discussion about what they want to accomplish. Rather, individuals tend to become very task-oriented and they act under the assumption that everyone on the team shares the same goals and priorities. This is problematic. Take the time early in the life of your team to outline your expectations of one another and remind yourselves of those expectations from time to time. Do this AS A TEAM. Also state your individual goals and work to develop concrete team goals. (Note: a goal such as earning an A, while concrete, is not something your group can assess on its own. Instead, focus on goals that your team is able to assess, such as outcomes that you agree might lead to an A.)

3. Discuss the Division of Labor. In attempting to involve all team members equally in a given project, teams often make one of two mistakes: (1) they try to involve *every* member in *every* aspect of *every* project or (2) they divide a project into pieces without ensuring that these pieces can and will be integrated into a coherent whole. Both approaches are recipes for failure and frustration. Effective teams are explicit about assigning different project tasks to different individuals (or pairs of individuals) and then deciding how those different portions will be integrated into one coherent product. This may involve the assignment of different roles that may change from project to project (e.g., "project integrator", "task coordinator"), and it also involves planning ahead and setting internal deadlines.

4. Discuss Your Schedules Early. Everyone is busy. An early discussion of your outside commitments for the duration of the project can help the team to plan meetings and make wise decisions about how to assign workloads. For example, if some team members will be out of town the weekend prior to the project due date, it will be in the team's interest to get the bulk of the work finished before that weekend. Similarly, if different individuals are particularly busy at different times, a plan can be developed that shifts workloads and responsibilities accordingly.

5. Embrace Differences. One of the biggest misconceptions that people have when they first begin working in teams is that disagreements are to be avoided and that conflict is bad. Nothing could be further from the truth. Your team **will** disagree about how to analyze information, how to proceed with assignments, or even whether someone is contributing as much as s/he should. If you ignore these points of difference or expect the instructor to resolve them you will sacrifice much of the learning that teamwork affords and your team's performance will suffer as a consequence. The key is to approach differences with candidness, respect, and common courtesy. If you do this, you'll find that conflict and disagreements are essential for producing a high-quality final product.

6. Choose Your Performance Appraisal System Carefully. In this course, you have the option of allowing everyone on the team to receive the same grade, or you can choose to implement a peer performance appraisal system that is tied to grades. The system you select can significantly impact the norms of your team. Have a discussion about which system you will adopt why. If you choose the peer performance appraisal system, be explicit in identifying the criteria you will use to evaluate one another's performance, (e.g., attendance at meetings, time spent on projects, intellectual leadership, etc.) and also make it very clear what the relationship of these evaluations will be to any grade redistributions. This must all be spelled out very clearly on the team contract and everyone must sign it for it to be enforceable.

Have Fun! Working in a team can be energizing and fun. Be creative and take advantage of this opportunity to learn from one another and to learn about teams.